(U) Write Right: There Is No Index of Forbidden Words

FROM: [redacted]
of the Reporting Board (S12A)
Run Date: 04/11/2005

(C) Like that notorious stump farm where a subterranean fire has smoldered for years, a long-standing debate rages unchecked regarding "forbidden words" in product reports. Occasionally it erupts and both the Reporting Board and the Reporting Policy & Guidance branch receive pleas to "tell us exactly what we can and can't say." Many of our longtime reporters were taught in the SIGINT equivalent of kindergarten that using verbs like "said", "told", etc. revealed that the source of the intelligence was SIGINT, or, more specifically, COMINT. Some offices used to maintain lists of such forbidden words -- but these lists were applicable only to those workcenters; they were not binding on the entire analytic workforce, nor were they maintained or endorsed by policy organizations.

(U) That was then; this is now. As our senior leadership has repeatedly said, we have gone from a need-to-know culture to a need-to-share one. More and more, as with the WTR exemption issue, we rely on the individual reporting office's familiarity with their sources and their customers to weigh the strength of the particular customer's need-to-know against whether the intelligence facts can be adequately understood and assessed without those details.

(C) Of course, there are words, and classes of words, to avoid in sanitizations, but they do not exist as the above-mentioned lists of "forbidden words"; rather, instructions on how to write so as to protect sources can be found on the Reporting Page ("go wtr").

(S//SI) As for the SI portion of a report, that content is for SI-cleared customers, who presumably should know at least that the information is derived from communications intercepts, even if they don't know how or where the info is actually obtained. Policy doesn't expressly prohibit communications words like "contacted", "instructed", "notified", "issued orders to", and the like in the SI sections, since such words merely indicate the fact that communications took place, not whether the communications consist of voice intercepts, faxes, e-mails, teleprinter messages, or even good old HF manual Morse. Whether to go so far as to indicate means and/or mode in the SI portions of a product is a judgment call, which should be based on the careful risk-vs-gain assessment described above. Reporters should consult all available expertise in their Product Line, from experienced senior reporters to the URS centers, for guidance.

(U//FOUO) Thanks to [redacted] of the Policy Services Division for his input to this article.

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